

# Setting history in stone

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If you visit Athens and make your way from the markets and tavernas of the modern city to the archaeological parks, you will notice wide open spaces, perhaps bustling with other visitors taking photos of awe-inspiring buildings such as the Parthenon. But have you ever wondered what these places looked like in ancient times? Archaeologists have for a long time reconstructed the buildings from their ruins, but what about the areas in between? What was placed here, and how did this affect the relationship between the Athenians and their city?

All over the Acropolis, as well as in the agora (marketplace) and other places within the city, the Athenians set up large stone slabs which recorded the decisions they had made in the Assembly. These *stelai* (singular: *stela*) detailed a range of information from financial records of the Athenian state to decrees made by the people, and honours granted for dignitaries. Instead of empty spaces filled with people looking at buildings, the area between the temples on the Acropolis was filled with large *stelai* and these *stelai* were filled with writing.

## Reading the writing on the wall

We are used to thinking about Greek culture as literary. We *read* the plays of Sophocles, the *Histories* of Herodotus, and the Homeric poems, but these works were *performed* in antiquity as much as read. Sophocles' plays were staged in the theatre, whilst Homer and Herodotus were read aloud at drinking parties attended by the wealthy. Although we rightly associate Greek culture with these works, the most common form of writing which has survived throughout the Greek world, and particularly in Athens, was writing on stone. Yet, even though there were large numbers of *stelai* set up all over the city, can we assume that they were widely 'read', or did people ignore them? Why did the Athenians set up so many inscriptions?

One reason for this was the importance placed on accountability in Athenian democratic culture. Officials were scrutinized before and after their year of office and had to present accounts of their financial dealings. Everyone had a stake in seeing that they had not embezzled funds, and so their accounts were published. Similarly, it made sense for the Athenians to publish new decrees on stone; everyone would know what the law was, and inscribing decisions in this way gave them an aura of gravity and permanence. But not all accounts and not all decrees were inscribed, and not every detail was included on the stone (although all were recorded in papyrus rolls or on wooden boards and stored in the city's archive). The Athenians made deliberate decisions about what to set in stone, and what not.

Inscriptions were set up in public places like sanctuaries or marketplaces for maximum effect. But when the Athenians walked past these *stelai*, did they stop to read them? Clearly there was an assumption that this information would reach the largest numbers of people possible, or they would not have been so prominently displayed. Perhaps we can assume that a large proportion of the Athenians could read, or read enough to get some information from the stone. But even if we do not imagine literacy rates being so high that every citizen would be able to read every word of every inscription, we can imagine a crowd of people surrounding a *stela* with one person reading out its contents. As we have seen with Greek literature, 'reading a text' often meant 'reading a text aloud for an audience'.

But sometimes the inscriptions were not meant to be read in

detail: many examples have very small letters high up on a large *stela* which would be almost impossible to read from the ground. In some cases it was more important to present information rather than to be able to read it, and this may be related to the places in which the inscriptions were set up. About two thirds of the inscriptions that survive from Athens were set up on the Acropolis, in the premier religious sanctuary of the Athenians. Receiving consent from the gods was fundamentally important for Athenian political decision-making, and by setting up inscriptions here the Athenians were underlining and promoting this link.

Writing on stone was so prevalent in the ancient world that its study has formed a branch of ancient history in itself. 'Epigraphy' adds to our knowledge of the ancient world and, excitingly, can expand and even contradict literary sources. Sometimes we can see clearly through the study of inscriptions how other writers have put their own spin on events. The story of the Egesta decree is a good example.

## Letters, lasers, and the Athenian empire

One of the most hotly-debated epigraphic texts in Athens is the Egesta decree. This broken, fragmentary text details a fifth-century alliance between the Athenians and a Sicilian city called Egesta. It is controversial because the part of the text which states when in the fifth century this decree was made is worn away by later re-use (the stone was used as a door lintel, and the rubbing of the door has worn away some of the letters). The date is important because it affects how we think about Athenian imperialism in the fifth century and the run up to the Sicilian expedition in 415.

The decree uses a type of lettering which historians once thought indicated a certain date range, and which crucially went out of use during the 440s. Letter styles are useful for saying that one inscription is Roman rather than classical, or that another is mid-fifth century rather than fourth century, and in the case of the Egesta decree it was suggested that the letter forms dated the stone to the 450s.

More precise dating can be done through the inscription itself. Commonly, Athenian state documents detailed when they were published by giving the name of an official (the archon) who was in power at the time. Since the archon held office for only one year, we can date any decree which has this information. Unfortunately the name of the archon on the Egesta decree is precisely in the place where the stone has been damaged. But all is not lost because the final two letters of his name survive with traces of a third. The two final letters (-on) narrow down the archon to three men: Ariston, Habron, and Antiphon, since no other archon in the fifth century has a name ending with -on. Enough traces of the third-to-last letter remain to rule out Ariston, but it is very difficult to see whether this letter is the *rho* (r) of Habron, the archon of 458/7, or the *phi* (ph) of Antiphon, the archon of 418/17. For a long time scholars have preferred to read Habron, since the letter styles suggested the earlier date, but there was persistent dissent from one historian who thought that Antiphon was the archon and that the letters were old-fashioned. The matter was only solved by using laser scanning technology and high-resolution image enhancing software to examine the stone, and this revealed not only traces of the *phi*, but of the preceding *iota* (i). The decree therefore belongs to 418/17 and

was made under the archonship of Antiphon.

### **The Egesta decree, Thucydides, and Athenian history**

If this document, with its old-fashioned lettering, is to be dated to the 410s instead of the 450s, we need to re-think all other documents with this style, and with it our opinion of the nature of Athenian imperialism. Thucydides implies that the Athenians were throwing their weight around very soon after the formation of the Delian League, and this has led many historians to date a range of inscriptions to the 450s based (almost solely) on letter styles. This inscription shows that we cannot do this and ‘old-fashioned’ letters were used long after we thought that they had gone out of use. The implication is that what was once thought to be the imperialistic behaviour of the Athenians in the mid-fifth century did not occur until a generation later.

A further implication of dating this decree to 418/17 is that it changes the way we think about the run-up to the Sicilian expedition. The problem is that Thucydides does not mention the alliance when writing about this period, although he does record Egestan envoys coming to Athens in 415. Thucydides is normally considered to be a reliable informant, so it is surprising that he does not mention such a recent alliance (or more correctly, present the envoys arguing that they need Athenian help *because of* this agreement). But this argument relies on us assuming that Thucydides knew everything that happened in a city from which he was exiled almost ten years previously, and that he recorded everything he knew – neither is fully the case. If the Athenians were making alliances in Sicily before 415, we would have another angle – apart from that of Thucydides – by which to explain why and how Athens made the decision to mount the Sicilian expedition. Thucydides’ opinion that it was a catastrophic mistake might be seen as spin.

The Egesta decree is a classic example of how vital a source inscriptions are for the historian trying to understand the ancient world. They open up a variety of worlds and enable us to form a different view from that given to us by ancient writers. They also pose questions about social phenomena such as literacy, and make us think about the physical environment of Greek cities. Inscriptions tell us that the interpretation of the past is never set in stone.

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